DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 400 728 HE 029 568

AUTHOR Hooper, William L.
TITLE Assignments That Require Thinking.
PUB DATE 29 Jul 96
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Center for Critical Thinking International Conference on Critical Thinking and Educational Reform (16th, Rohnert Park, CA, July 29, 1996).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Art Education; *Concept Teaching; *Critical Thinking; *Curriculum Design; Fine Arts; Fundamental Concepts; Higher Education; Introductory Courses; *Music Education; Thinking Skills

ABSTRACT

In designing a curriculum for a college Fine Arts course, the author has developed types of assignments which require his freshman students to engage in critical and conceptual thinking rather than in rote repetition of information. The assignments are based on key concepts in the fields of music and art. Textbooks are considered only one among many sources of information to be used. While basic information in the subject area must be correctly formulated, students are encouraged to make contextual and inferential connections and to consider competing points of view. Students are expected to use key concepts of the subject field effectively, to analyze basic questions and issues clearly, to use professional terminology, and to recognize and distinguish the relevant from the irrelevant. Opportunities are given for the students to use learned concepts in real life contexts, such as performance. (PRW)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 400 728

Assignments That Require Thinking

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
William L. Hooper
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

by

Dr. William L. Hooper
Professor of Music
Southwest Baptist University
Bolivar, Missouri
email: bhooper@sbuniv.edu
Fax: 417-326-1514

Presented at

The 16th International Conference on Critical Thinking and Educational Reform

Sonoma State University
July 29, 1996

HE 029 568

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Both the ecstasy and the agony of teaching freshman college students is helping them learn to think. As I tried various methods of helping learn to think critically, it occurred to me that a lot of my assignments were little more than "busy work." They did not require students to do any thinking in order to complete. They could read for the right answers rather than read for understanding. They could complete some assignments because of prior experience and not because of what they were learning in the class. This led me to consider the type of assignments to make that would require critical thinking and not a mindless repeating of information. My approach to teaching has changed drastically since starting this pilgrimage.

Courses Are Built Upon A Key Concept

All course content should be organized on the basis of concepts. A concept is something conceived in the mind of an abstract idea generalized from particular instances. A concept is a mental image of what one has perceived through the senses. We express concepts in verbal statements which describe a person's mental conceptualization. Students have developed a concept when they can put it in their own words, give a specific example of it, and explain its importance.

Most of the courses we teach could be organized around one overarching concept. Once this is done, everything else in the course falls into place with subsidiary concepts. I teach a general education course in fine arts. A key concept for the course "Introduction to Fine Arts" could be the following:

> People throughout history and in various cultures have expressed their deepest feelings about life through singing songs, making pictures, acting out stories, carving figures, building monuments and dancing.

Starting with this key concept the course is organized historically around basic concepts in music and the visual arts. For example, music concepts are organized under four large concepts, each with supporting concepts. The raw material of music is sound. Therefore, we have concepts about *pitch* - the high and low of sounds, *rhythm* - how sound moves, *timbre* - the quality of sound, and *expression* - how and what the sound expresses in

terms of descriptors.

Concepts of the visual arts are also organized around four large concepts, each with supporting concepts. The raw material of visual art is some kind of medium: paint, stone, metal, wood, and similar things. Therefore, we have concepts about *color* - the visual perception which enables us to distinguish between otherwise identical objects, *shape* - the boundaries established on a plane, *space* - the perception of three dimensions in two-dimensional space, and *expression* - how and what the art expresses in terms of descriptors.

Types of Assignments That Require Thinking

The purpose of class assignments should be to help students develop the concepts inherent in a course. Too often assignments may be more busy work than real learning exercises because we have not matched a learning activity with a concept to be learned through the activity. Consequently, we should design assignments which emphasize the *essential* - what is absolutely necessary to learn concepts, the *significant* - that which has meaning in relation to concepts, and the *long-term* - learning that lasts a lifetime. Assignments which require only the memorizing of facts or manipulation of materials do not aid in the development of concepts because they do not require the student to use thought processes to arrive at solutions.

What kinds of learning activities will help students develop concepts? Of the learning activities identified by Richard Paul, students need to do at least eight things in order to learn concepts in the fine arts: identifying and solving fundamental problems, formulating information correctly, identifying relevant competing points of view, using key concepts of the subject field effectively, analyzing basic questions and issues clearly and precisely, using language of the field in keeping with professional usage, recognizing key questionable assumptions, and distinguishing the relevant from the irrelevant.

These activities are not isolated events for there is a great deal of overlapping between them. The idea is to design assignments which require one mode of thinking predominately. These assignments can be completed either at home or in the classroom.

Students should be held responsible for the completed assignments are processed with both teacher and class members critiquing the results in the classroom.

Identifying and Solving Fundamental Problems

The key concept for the fine arts course implies there is a connection between artistic style and the people who develop and use that style. A fundamental problem is to help students make this connection. Too often students conceive the arts as something that have never existed outside a museum or concert hall. In an attempt to get students to make that connection, they are asked to make a painting analysis of "The Oath of the Horatii" by Jacques-Louis David. Painted in 1784 this painting is based upon the legendary history of ancient Rome by Livy (BC 59-AD 17). It depicts three Roman brothers vowing to fight a death-duel with three Alban brothers to decide the war between Rome and Alba.

Students are asked two questions about the painting: (1) What specific Neoclassic style traits do you see? and (2) Why do you think the French revolutionary factions adopted neoclassicism as its official artistic style? The textbook guides students in the style analysis but the second question can be answered only by making inferences. Since there were no mass media as we think of them, visual art had a journalistic and propagandist function. Just as stoicism and patriotism were the highest virtues of the Roman Empire, they were also the highest virtues of the French revolution. Thus, the painting becomes both an embodiment and a proponent of revolutionary ideals.

Formulating Information Correctly

Many students fail to conceptualize because they do not grasp basic information correctly. The following assignment requires students to formulate information correctly.

> You are a cultural attaché in the American Embassy in Athens and have prepared a one-page article about Polykleitos and his sculpture of the Spear Carrier for a tourist brochure. In your article you (1) describe the sculpture, (2) why it will be a standard against which all other sculptures will be measured in the future, and (3) how it illustrates the statement of Protagoras that "Man is the measure of all things." Let me have a copy of your article.

The Spear Carrier is a Greek statue dated around BC 450 and is considered to be a landmark in the development of realistic sculpture. The textbook is very explicit in giving students information to help them answer the first two questions. Question three requires them to pull the information together and make inferences about what they have read. If the information is formulated correctly valid inferences can be made.

Identifying Relevant Competing Points of View

Often students seem to think there are no competing points of view in what they study. The student perception is that everyone agrees about everything and it is simply a matter of them memorizing what the textbook and the teacher are saying. How do teachers get students to understand that valid competing points of view do exist and that some points of view are more relevant that others?

One of the competing points of view in music is the debate between program music and absolute music. Does music describe scenes and tell a story, or does it present nothing but itself? Symphony No. 6 by Beethoven is used as an example of this competition of views. Some claim Beethoven was trying to describe rural scenes musically, while others claim he was merely expressing personal feelings since the music adheres to traditional musical forms. Included in the debate is whether or not this symphony is a classical work or a romantic work.

After reading the text, students are invited to enter the debate:

1. Why would some people refer to this piece as Romantic music? Why would others say it was not Romantic?

2. What do you think the textbook means when it says this symphony is "an essay on a sequence of emotional experiences with nature?" Does this statement seem to imply that the authors believe the music is Romantic? Support your answers.

Using Key Concepts of the Field Effectively.

When students know and understand concepts they can use those concepts in their thought processes. If opportunities are given for students to use concepts in real-life situations we can determine the extent students can use them effectively. Attending concerts

and visiting art museums are two real-life situations which require students to use concepts by writing reviews of what they have seen or heard.

In my fine arts course students are required to review concerts according to the following instructions:

1. Give a description of each work or group of works you hear and your personal reaction to each. Describe the music as well as you can in your own words using the terms presented in this course.

2. Try to include in your review:

   - The performing medium - is it a solo recital, a jazz band concert, etc. (also special instruments and soloists).
   - The general form of the music (symphony, concerto, dance forms, etc.).
   - Any outstanding features of melody, rhythm, texture, style, etc.

Since students are required to attend five concerts there is ample time for growth to take place. Initial attempts are not very profound. Students do not know exactly what to write. They lack basic vocabulary as well as basic concepts and resort to phrases like "the music is upbeat" instead of discussing tempo or rhythm. By the time they have completed the last review the proper use of terms and concepts becomes more evident.

Analyzing Basic Questions and Issues Clearly and Precisely.

Analysis plays a large role in any study of the arts. If the arts have been ways people have expressed deepest feelings analysis is the way we discover how people have gone about putting their expression into an artistic form. The following assignments are designed to lead students through a basic analysis of material in an elementary way.

One piece of music that is analyzed is "Nuper rosarum flores" by the Renaissance composer Dufay. Students answer the following analysis questions:

1. What is the occasion for which the music was written? Is the music appropriate? Why?

2. In a paragraph describe how sound is organized

   A. By pitch, including melody, tonality and harmony.
   B. According to rhythm, including pulse, tempo and meter.

C. In terms of timbre, including instruments, voices and ensembles.
D. Expressively, including dynamics.

An example of a painting to be analyzed is "The Holy Trinity" by the Renaissance painter Masaccio. Students are required to describe, in their own words,

1. The overall color in terms of hue, intensity, value and color organization.
2. The shape of the painting in terms of line, design and form.
3. How space is created in terms of perspective.
4. The expressive qualities in terms of subject matter and style traits of the period.

Using the Language of the Field in Keeping with Established Professional Usage

Teachers have an obligation to teach students how to use the language of the field as professionals in the field use it. We should not let them get by with terms like "cool" or "upbeat" or "this guy." The teacher must decide what language is essential to be learned and used. Since the fine arts course is one for general education my expectations for the use of professional language of the field is less for the general student than my expectations are students majoring in the arts. However, there are basic terms that require understanding and proper use. The examples of homework given above all require the use of language that is pertinent to the arts. All assignments include an element of correct language use which I accept as a given.

By the end of the semester most of the students in the fine arts course are able to use professional language satisfactorily when completing the following assignment. Students do not memorize a set definition to parrot back. Instead, they are guided in developing a concept of what the term means. When they can define and use the term satisfactorily in their own words I am satisfied they have developed the concept.

One piece of music selected for analysis is "Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima" by Krzysztof Penderecki. It is a very modern piece of music with no traditional ideas of melody, rhythm, harmony, etc. The music is highly evocative of the dropping of the first atomic bomb. However clear the story is, students must describe the music in musical terms

and not merely tell the story, especially in answer to question 4:

1. Describe, in your own words, the meter and pulse, melody, harmony, and dynamics of the music.
2. What kinds of sounds do you hear in the music?
3. Is the music in any sense descriptive of the title? Support your answer.
4. What do you hear that tells you this is modern music?

Recognizing Key Questionable Assumptions

Everyone makes assumptions, some of which are based upon fact and clear thinking, while other assumptions are based upon anything but clear thinking and fact. An assumption may sound very good on the surface, but is it valid? The following is an assumption given by one writer. He is relating a very common definition of art which makes the work of art totally relative to any objective standards.

> "If the originator intends it as a work of art, it is one. Whether it is good or bad . . . matters little." (Dennis Sporre)

In groups, I have students question Sporre's assumption by giving each group one of the following questions to answer: What are possible presuppositions Sporre has for holding this assumption? What objective standards for evaluating art are possible? Who determines the standards for art? Can we use ethical terms, such as "good" and "bad" in reference to works of art? Should the quality of works of art "matter?"

Distinguishing the Relevant from the Irrelevant.

In trying to impress their teachers students include both trivial and irrelevant material in their written work. Much or even most of the irrelevant material will be true, but the writers have failed to grasp what is relevant to the question at hand. A typical assignment follows:

> The year is 1849. You are an art critic for a Paris newspaper. You have just written a short article describing Courbet's painting "Burial at Ornans" and criticizing his Realist style traits from the standpoint of the academic art of your day. You conclude the article by comparing Courbet's painting with an example of genuine art, El Greco's "The Burial of Count Orgaz." Please give me a copy of your article.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

To complete the above assignment satisfactorily, students must know the style of Courbet's painting and how it differed from the painting style of the established art community. They must know the criticisms leveled at Courbet and why he was being criticized. They must describe and compare the two paintings and make a case for why the El Greco work is superior according to the standards of art critics in 1849.

Since the format for the assignment is a newspaper article, details about Courbet's life and training are not relevant. A discussion of other Courbet works is not relevant. A discussion of the standards of the established art community is not relevant, but using those standards to criticize Courbet is relevant. Detailed information about El Greco and the background of his painting is not relevant, but the validity of his painting according to the Parisian art critics of the day is relevant.

The challenge for students is to take a large amount of information, decide what is relevant for a newspaper article, and then write the article so the reader understands the issues. The newspaper format is chosen as a true-to-life situation to motivate the students in their thinking. When students think they must be "scholarly" they are prone to include a lot of information that is not relevant in trying to be scholarly.

Conclusion

This approach to assignment-making is based upon three assumptions: (1) all course content is the product of thought; (2) consequently, course content can be thought about; and, (3) course content can be learned only through thinking about it. This is why I start with the concepts of the course in organizing material rather than the organization of the text book. The text is merely one fallible source of information; it should not determine the concepts I teach from and it does not have the final word on the subject. I choose the textbook on the basis of ease of reading and the color prints and music examples included.

At first, students have difficulty in adjusting to this kind of approach to teaching and learning. They are used to lectures, rote learning and multiple-choice tests. They are not used to reading. They are not used to thinking about what they read. They do not understand

that learning requires a personal commitment to what one thinks is true, and that the commitment to learning is life-long and expanding. The reward is to see all this change in varying degrees in the learning of most of my students.